

Can Egoism Provide a Solid Basis for Morality?

Lea Wisken, St Andrews

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1. Introduction

It has often been argued that Egoism is by definition incompatible with morality. We will challenge this viewpoint in the following analysis, arguing that the assumption of incompatibility rests on a false premise. This will allow us to enquire whether or not Egoism can provide a basis for morality. To answer in the affirmative, it is sufficient to show that the claim that Egoism *could* be such a basis cannot in all cases be refuted.

2. Gert Against Egoism

Bernard Gert's book "*Morality – Its Nature and Justification*" puts forward a strong argument against the compatibility of the two concepts Egoism and morality. According to the Gert, morality has to be a rational principle that can be applied universally to all rational persons. He further states that morality functions not only as a guide for the individual person who adopts it but also that "a person who adopts it must also propose its adoption by everyone." The scholar concludes that Egoism cannot lie within this definition of morality, because "no one would put forward ethical egoism to be adopted by everyone."¹

Gert's argument is vulnerable, however, because he does not justify the claim that one has to promote a moral guide, which one adopts. The reasoning behind this claim could be presumed to look as follows:

Premise 1: If I adopt a moral guide, I must be convinced that this moral guide is right.

Premise 2: If I am convinced that something is right, I have to promote it.

Conclusion: If I adopt a moral guide, I have to promote that everyone adopts it. I cannot adopt Ethical Egoism as a moral principle because I would not promote it.

On closer inspection, premise 2 is not true; it is perfectly possible to believe that something is right without promoting it. If you are convinced of the validity of a moral guide, this means

¹ Bernard Gert, "*Morality – Its Nature and Justification*" (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. Oxford Scholarship Online, Oxford University Press, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/0195176898.001.0001>, accessed on 29.10.2008), p. 8

that you have to think that if everyone else were rational, then they should adopt the principle. The crucial point is that this “should” is not to be understood in the sense that you *want* the other person to adopt it. It is merely a “should” in the sense that you think the adoption would be reasonable *from the other person’s point of view*.

3. Wanting Others to be Irrational

As an example, consider the difference between telling your husband that he should never cheat on you and telling your friend that she should better not cheat on her husband because this might bring her into a lot of trouble if she were found out. In the first case, the “should” simply expresses your preference: You do not want to be betrayed. This is not the “should” involved in thinking that others should adopt a moral principle. Here, “should” takes the rationally evaluative meaning, which is paralleled in the advice given to the friend who considers adulterousness.

In this sense, if Kathrin thinks James should adopt Ethical Egoism if he were rational, this does not mean that she necessarily *wants* him to adopt it. If Kathrin does not want James to adopt the principle, she will not promote it. As one can see, from being convinced that something is right it does not necessarily follow that one has to promote it.

Premise 2 therefore has to be adapted. This changes the definition of a moral guide. Now, adopting a moral principle means that you have to be convinced that everyone else would act rationally by adopting it but it does not necessarily mean that you have to promote it. This allows us to view Egoism as not being by definition out of the realm of morality. However, not all of versions of Ethical Egoism lie within our new definition. Lawrence M. Hinman identified three different versions of Ethical Egoism. Out of these, one falls out our definition of a moral guide, while the difference between the remaining two becomes blurred if they are supplemented with Gert’s qualification of rationality as a prerequisite for the identification of a moral guide. The three different versions identified by Lawrence M. Hinman are characterized as follows:

Individual Ethical Egoism (Everyone should act in my interest)

Personal Ethical Egoism (I should act in my interest, everyone else may do what they want)

Universal Ethical Egoism (Everyone should act in their own interest)²

Individual Ethical Egoism cannot be a basis for morality within our adapted definition. When you adopt a moral guide, the definition requires both that it seems rational to you and that you consider its adoption to be rational for everyone else as well. In the case of an individual egoist this would mean that it would have to be rational for a second person to promote both your and her interests, which is impossible if these interests collide. You cannot consider it rational that Bernd should give you chocolate and at the same time consider it rational that instead Bernd ate the chocolate himself. Therefore, Individual Ethical Egoism cannot provide a basis for morality.

² Lawrence M. Hinman “Look out for #1 – and there is no #2: Ethical Egoism” (Ethics Updates - Presentation: Ethical Egoism <http://ethics.sandiego.edu/presentations/theory/EthicalEgoism/index.asp> - 9/15/2006, accessed on 18.10.08), p. 8.

Universal Ethical Egoism, as well, does not concur with our definition unless adapted. Demanding that everyone should do what is in their interest makes a normative demand without qualifying the “should” as one which merely evaluates the rationality of the choice of principle. If this qualification is made, Universal Ethical Egoism merges with Personal Ethical Egoism. The egoist can at the same time concede that everyone else may do what they want and hold that everyone else should decide to be egoists *if they are rational*. This combination of Personal and adapted Universal Ethical Egoism lies within our definition of a moral guide and therefore cannot be treated as ab initio incompatible with the requirements for a basis of morality. That does not mean that it necessarily is a basis for morality but it implies that it could be. This allows us to now go further into the question whether or not Egoism can be judged as “right” in a moral sense of the term. Such a judgment could be based upon one out of three factors: The intention, the act itself or the outcome.³ If Egoism can be judged as “good” in at least one of these terms, then we can no longer deny the possibility of it actually representing a basis for morality. In the last part of this essay the analysis will therefore only focus on the outcome of Egoism, displaying that given certain prerequisites it can stand as a valid justification for Egoism as a moral principle.

4. A Good Outcome: For Whom?

Many defenders of Egoism have taken a Utilitarian approach, arguing that Egoism leads to good outcomes. Adam Smith, for example, proposes in “The Wealth of Nations” that everyone would be better off if every person promoted her self-interest. Others try to reconcile Egoism and Utilitarianism via sympathy or rewards in after-life.⁴ However, these accounts set utilitarian standards of a “good outcome.” This cannot be a way to defend Egoism because Egoism clashes with Utilitarianism by denying the existence of a “Universal” or “Total Good” which is to be valued higher than the interest of the individual.

Derek Parfit recognizes the importance of making a very clear distinction between utilitarian and egoistic standards. In his text “Reasons and Persons” he discusses the Self-Interest theory, which is a theory about how best to apply Ethical Egoism.⁵ This means that any judgment on the outcomes of the Self-Interest Theory is equal to a judgment on the consequences of Ethical Egoism (if well-applied).

Parfit says that instead of judging the theory’s success at a collective level, we should judge the outcome at the individual level, where it succeeds by leading to better results for each person. He explains that the Prisoner’s Dilemma does not, as has often been claimed, defeat the Self-Interest Theory; the prisoners fail as a group, but each does better. He sees no reason why the theory should succeed at a collective level. If each person judges their interest to be more important to herself, then each person ought to apply the Self-Interest Theory even though she

³ Lisa Jones, University of St Andrews, handout of PY1105, 30.09.2008.

⁴ See Charlie Dunbar Broad, *Five types of Ethical Theory* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1930, <http://www.ditext.com/broad/ftet/ftet6.html>, accessed on 30. 10.08), p. 159 – 162.

⁵ Derek Parfit, “Reasons and Persons” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986. Oxford Scholarship Online. Oxford University Press, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/019824908X.001.0001>, accessed on 27.10.08), p. 90 - 92.

would prefer if others did not apply it.

A parallel argument is given by Henry Sidgwick and Marcus G. Singer who recognize that Egoism cannot be defeated by rational arguments: “If the Egoist strictly confines himself to stating his conviction that he ought to take his own happiness or pleasure as his ultimate end, there seems no opening for an argument to lead him to Utilitarianism.”⁶ In other words, if the Ethical Egoist says that his interest is what is most important *to him*, then it is impossible to have a real discussion because there is no convincing reason forcing him to consider something else as his priority.

5. Conclusion

After all, from the perspective of each individual who applies the principle of Egoism, Ethical Egoism can be seen as having a “good” outcome and as therefore providing a possible basis for morality. This is the crucial point of every discussion about Egoism: When we ask about “good” or “bad”, the question is whether we take the “view of the universe”, as does Utilitarianism, or the view of the individual. In the end, whether or not Ethical Egoism can be a basis for morality depends on the perspective one takes.

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⁶ Henry Sidgwick and Marcus G. Singer, “Essays on Ethics and Method” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Oxford Scholarship Online. Oxford University Press, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/0198250231.001.0001>, accessed on 28.10.2008), p. 8 - 9.

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A: Edgecliffe, The Scores, St Andrews, Fife, KY16 9AR
W: <http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~philsoc/>
E: philsocmail@st-andrews.ac.uk